R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 011 609 24

SOME CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE.

BY- RUBEL, ARTHUR J.

REPORT NUMBER BR-5-0249-21 PUB DATE FEB 66
CONTRACT OEC-6-10-108
EDRS PRICE MF-$0.09 HC-$0.24 6P.

DESCRIPTORS- SYMPOSIA, *SPANISH SPEAKING, *MEXICAN AMERICANS, *ENGLISH (SECOND LANGUAGE), *BILINGUALISM, DEMOGRAPHY, *ANTHROPOLOGY, AUSTIN

THE SOCIAL SYMBOLISM OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE FOR MEXICAN-AMERICANS WAS DISCUSSED AT A SYMPOSIUM. THE CULTURAL FACTORS RELATED TO THIS SYMBOLISM WERE OBSERVED BY THE AUTHOR IN THE COURSE OF CONDUCTING TWO DIFFERENT ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES OF THE SOCIAL LIFE OF AMERICANS OF MEXICAN DESCENT IN SOUTH TEXAS. THE RESULTS OF THESE STUDIES WERE ALSO RELATED TO A STUDY OF THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY OF TUCSON. POPULATION GROWTHS OF BOTH MEXICANS AND ANGLOS IN THE TWO AREAS WERE OBSERVED TO BE COMPARABLE. THE ANGLOS WERE PRINCIPALLY OF MIDDLE- AND UPPER-CLASS BACKGROUNDS AND ECONOMICALLY SUCCESSFUL, WHILE MOST OF THE MEXICANS WERE UNSKILLED, UNDEREDUCATED, POVERTY-STRIKEN IMMIGRANTS FROM RURAL MEXICO. THE AUTHOR ASSERTS THAT THE SOCIAL IDEOLOGY GUIDING INTERGROUP RELATIONS IN THE SOUTHWEST AFFIRMS THIS TO BE AN OPEN-CLASS SOCIETY IN WHICH SPANISH-SPEAKING AMERICANS FORM AS MUCH A PART AS THE ANGLOS. IN CONTRAST, MEXICAN-AMERICANS MUST ACQUIRE ANGLO TRAITS OF BEHAVIOR TO BETTER THEIR WELFARE AND SOCIAL STATUS. IN THIS SITUATION, THE MEXICAN AMERICANS ACCEPT THE NEED TO ACQUIRE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SKILLS, BUT SEE NO ADVANTAGE IN ADOPTING OTHER ANGLO CULTURAL TRAITS. THEY REGARD THOSE WHO GIVE UP SPANISH AS TURNING THEIR BACKS ON THEIR PEOPLE. THEY SEE THE PROHIBITION OF THE USE OF SPANISH ON THE SCHOOL GROUNDS AS DEGRADING THEIR ENTIRE TRADITIONAL WAY OF LIFE. THE RETENTION OF SPANISH IDENTIFIES A SEPARATE CULTURAL GROUP, WHILE THE USE OF ENGLISH LESSENS THE IDENTIFICATION OF THESE PEOPLE WITH MEXICO AND THEIR MEXICAN CULTURAL HERITAGE. (AL)

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE
Office of Education
This document has been reproduced exactly as received from the person or organization originating it. Points of view or opinions stated do not necessarily represent official Office of Education position or policy.

BR-5-0249-21
OEC-6-10-108
BA-24

AA000044

Arthur J. Rubel
Department of Anthropology and
College of Education
The University of Texas

AERA Symposium
February, 1966

SOME CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

The data which I present are some of the fruits of two intensive anthropological studies of the social life of Americans of Mexican descent who reside in south Texas. The first of the two studies consisted of a two-year investigation of Mexican-Americans who live in a small city along the Texas-Mexico border. That study began in 1957 and was completed two years later. The second is still on-going and consists of an inquiry in which the lives of relatively successful Mexican-Americans who live in San Antonio are compared with those who are relatively unsuccessful.

The first study of the border city utilized traditional anthropological methods of participant observation supplemented by a series of open-ended questionnaire interviews. The current study of San Antonio utilizes a representative sample of the entire Spanish-surname population of that city to which is being administered two questionnaires, one of a survey type, the other an intensive follow-up interview. These techniques are supplemented by T.A.T.'s participant observation of political and social gatherings and informal interview of influentials in that city.

Although neither of the two studies had as primary objects the cultural factors which relate to English as a second language for the Spanish-speaking population of Texas, that topic recurred so often in discussions and so often it stirred strong, even heated, sentiment as to suggest it to be at least as much a matter of interest and concern to the Spanish-speaking population as it is to educators and educational researchers.

In order to broaden the base of observation about English as a second language, I will also have reference to an interesting article by an anthropologist, Professor George C. Barker, who studied the social function of language in the Mexican-American community of Tucson, Arizona. Many of Barker's observations about Tucson can be extended and applied as well to south Texas.

The most general understanding one gains from Barker's work is that when two people of different cultural background live side by side the languages used by them assume symbolic value quite apart from the message which they are intended to convey. It is the social symbolism of language which engages my attention today.

To begin with, there follow several important similarities between the Tucson situation and that of south Texas. In both regions

ED011609

there were well established Spanish-speaking colonies long before the arrival of English-speaking Americans. The Spanish-speaking populations of both areas were relatively small until they increased sharply during the years of the Mexican Revolution (1910-17); each of the two areas served as havens to large numbers of refugees from the political, social, economic, and even physical insecurity which were present at that time in the Mexican Nation. At the same time as the number of Spanish-speaking population was rising rapidly, there was a sharp increase in the size of English-speaking population. Thus, in both areas, and at the same time, we find an increase in the number of representatives of two cultural groups, Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans, the members of each accustomed to speaking different languages.

Moreover, whereas the Anglo members tended to be of middle and upper-class background, were relatively well educated, engaged in commerical farming and entrepreneurial activites, the Spanish-speaking people were for the most part unskilled, undereducated, and poverty-stricken immigrants from rural Mexico. Although it is true that there was also movement of native-born American citizens of Mexican descent from rural areas of Arizona and Texas into the rapidly expanding cities of those two states, they too were characterized by lack of skills and very little education.

In Tucson and south Texas, both, the most striking aspects of the society is its division into two major segments of which one is known as Mexican-American, the other Anglo-American. In both areas the two segments tend to be segregated one from the other, in some instances as a result of city ordinance but more usually as a result of choice and limitations of economic means. Finally, although there is some considerable amount of formal contact between representatives of the segments of the population, that is, between tradesmen and customers, teachers and students, doctors and patients, there is still remarkably little informal interaction between the two groups, and this is especially so in recreational activities.

Although some Mexican-Americans complain that the above described conditions are analogous to those which obtain between Whites and Negroes in the Deep South, the evidence does not support such a position. I am sorry not to have the time to pursue the difference between these two situations but I hope that some of the differences will become clear, at least by inference.

The social ideology which guides intergroup relations in the Southwest very strongly affirms that this is an open class society of which Spanish-speaking Americans form as much a part as their Anglo counterparts. Quite in conformity with that ideology, a considerable amount of effort is expended by Anglo individuals, church groups, education and welfare agencies to encourage and prepare Mexican-Americans to orient themselves toward upward mobility within the social-economic status system. However, to better one's welfare and

social status, it is maintained the Mexican-Americans must acquire the Anglo traits of behavior. Above all other such traits, English language skills are considered the most important. The importance imputed to the control of English language skills may be inferred from a widespread pattern in which school administrations prohibit young scholastics from speaking Spanish on or near the school grounds. Moreover, in practically all school systems Spanish is taught only as a foreign language similar to German, French, Latin and Greek. It is difficult indeed to over-emphasize the practical and symbolic importance which administrators and teachers attach to the acquiring of English and the loss of Spanish by young school children.

At this junction let me shift attention to the symbolic value which English holds for Mexican-Americans in the Southwest. To begin, I can think of no other punitive program which has had so contrary an outcome as the one just described in which the use of Spanish is prohibited on and around the school grounds. Not only is Spanish heard whenever a supervisory teacher is not in the immediate vicinity, but the very prohibition itself has increased the importance which spoken Spanish has for the Mexican-American and the Southwest.

The ban is considered one more instance of the denigration of the entire traditional way of life of Spanish-speaking Americans by the dominant Anglo-American group. To some extent, such interpretation helps one to understand why so very small a proportion of the people of Mexican descent have become English-speaking monolinguals. However, this does not imply a tendency for people to reject English as a second language nor should it be understood as suggesting that parents discourage their children from learning English. As a matter of fact, in the course of these investigations I have found only one person who does not agree that it is important for children to learn English (oddly enough, he happened to be a former school teacher with an M.A. in education).

The general acceptance of a need to learn and to control English-language skills without, however, rejecting Spanish is but one instructive reflection of the fact that although Mexican-Americans feel strongly a need to achieve equal social status with the Anglos, on the other hand they perceive no great advantage in adopting the entire package of Anglo cultural traits in order to do so. English, it is stated, is necessary to earn a good living in clean occupations (non-agricultural). No one questions that claim. However, it is stated with conviction, we need not use it for all kinds of interactions, and so Spanish is retained as a means of communicating in other than business and working situations.

For those who use English in their home and their social relations other than business and work, they are accused of "having turned their backs" on their people.

No other cultural trait matches Spanish as a symbol of the integrity of the Mexican-American of the Southwest. Needless to say, however, colloquial Spanish in this region is now permeated by English vocabulary and English constructions, so much so that this peculiar dialect has been recognized by separate names: Tex-Mex in Texas, Pocho in Arizona and elsewhere in the Southwest.

The influence of English on the Spanish of the Southwest contributes to the very fast developing sense of distinctiveness which the Spanish-speaking person of the Southwest feels when he visits Mexico or is visited in turn by Mexican nationals.

On the one hand the retention of Spanish connotes for this group an identity separate from that of the Anglo segment of the population in the Southwest, whereas on the other hand the influence of English on the Spanish of the Southwest lessens the sense of identification which the Spanish-speaking people of the Southwest hold to Mexico, wellspring of the traditional way of life of the people of the American Southwest.